

CHARLES LORING BRACE AND THE DANGEROUS CLASSES
HISTORICAL ANALOGUES OF THE URBAN BLACK POOR

Francesco Cordasco
Montclair State College

An overview of the work of Charles Loring Brace (1826-1890), one of the founders of the Children's Aid Society, and with particular attention to Brace's The Dangerous Classes of New York and Twenty Years' Work Among Them (1872). Brace was one of the most influential late 19th century social reformers who largely articulated the concept of self-help and opposed all charitable efforts which (in his view) tended toward pauperization. Sees Brace as an appropriate source from which to approach contemporary American urban poverty and relates Brace to contemporary American urban poverty and relates Brace to contemporary urban reformers, e.g., Daniel P. Moynihan and Bayard Rustin. Discerns in Brace "(and preeminently in the contemporary Moynihan) a pragmatism whose constructs, literally implemented spell out in clear detail the routes which lead out of poverty as they have been formulated over the course of a century."

In the "Introduction" to The Dangerous Classes of New York, Charles Loring Brace sets both its tone and its intent:

that the cheapest and most efficacious way of dealing with the 'Dangerous Classes' of large cities, is not to punish them, but to prevent their growth; to so throw the influences of education and discipline and religion about the abandoned and destitute youth of our large towns; to so change their material circumstances, and draw them under the influence of the moral and fortunate classes, that they shall grow up as useful producers and members of society, able and inclined to aid it in its progress.

In the view of this book, the class of a large city most dangerous to its property, its morals and its political life, are the ignorant, destitute, untrained, and abandoned youth: the outcast street-children grown up to be voters, to be the implements of demagogues, the 'feeders' of the criminals and the sources of domestic outbreaks and violations of law (pp. i-ii).

With allowance for its language and its rigorously moral posture, its sentiment is not basically different from that of a contemporary social scientist who expressed the sentiment in these terms:

...the Negro lower class must be dissolved. This is the work of a generation, but it is time it began to be understood as a clear national goal. By lower class I mean the low income, marginally employed, poorly educated, disorganized slum dwellers who have piled up in our central cities over the past quarter century. I would estimate they make up almost one half the total Negro population.

They are not going to become capitalists, nor even middle class functionaries. But it is fully reasonable to conceive of them being transformed into a stable working class population: truck drivers, mail carriers, assembly line workers--people with dignity, purpose, and in the United States a very good standard of living indeed. Common justice, and common sense, demands that this be done.

It is the existence of this lower class, with its high rates of crime, dependency, and general disorderliness, that causes nearby whites (that is to say working class whites, the liberals are all in the suburbs) to fear Negroes and to seek by various ways to avoid and constrain them.

It is this group that black extremists use to threaten white society with the prospect of mass arson and pillage. It is also this group that terrorizes and plunders the stable elements of the Negro community-trapped by white prejudice in the slums, and forced to live cheek by jowl with a murderous slum population. Take the urban lower class out of the picture and Negro cultural revolution becomes an exciting and constructive development.¹

And this is not to suggest that Brace is an appropriate source from which to approach contemporary American urban poverty; or, to suggest that Daniel Patrick Moynihan is the archetypal social reformer spawned out of America's rediscovery of poverty in the mid-1960's. But there is in Brace (and preeminently in the contemporary Moynihan) a pragmatism whose constructs, literally implemented, spell out in clear detail the routes which lead out of poverty as they have been formulated over the course of a century. The recurring key is the conversion of an underclass (Brace's "dangerous classes") into the stabilized working class of Moynihan's memorandum: a concept fraught with the perils of class revolution, ideological warfare, and the counter strategies of threatened power contexts.² And if Brace's The Dangerous Classes of New York is not the source from which one approaches the contemporary patterns of urban pathology and poverty, it is one of the sources to which the scholar inevitably is drawn (assuming good scholarship and serious study) to help delineate and comprehend the historical perspectives in which social and urban disaffection is to be seen.

Charles Loring Brace (1826-1890) spent most of his life attempting to ameliorate urban poverty, and much of this effort was in conjunction with The Children's Aid Society of New York which he had helped to found in 1853, and whose secretary he remained for some thirty years.³ Bremner observes on the Society's emigration policy for children (of which Brace was the architect):

Consistent with the current spirit of individualism, Brace disliked the idea of institutional care for children. 'The best of all Asylums for the outcast child,' he asserted, 'is the farmer's home.' One of the major purposes of the Children's Aid Society, which he /Brace/ organized in 1853, was to procure foster homes for New York's vagrant boys and girls in rural districts. Promoting emigration, however, was not the sole aim of the Society, but rather the final step in what Brace called the program of 'moral disinfection.' The first step was the assignment of a visitor or paid agent to a given neighborhood. It was his duty to learn all he could about the area, and to make himself acquainted with the children and their problems. The next move was to conduct informal religious exercises for boys of the neighborhood. In time, if circumstances warranted and resources were available, the Society established a free reading room, an industrial school (for children who were 'too poor, too ragged, and undisciplined for public schools') and lodging-houses for newsboys and other homeless working children. Eventually, through vacation and convalescent homes, and a sick children's mission employing twelve doctors and four nurses to visit sick children in their homes, the original program was significantly broadened... The promising cases discovered in the Society's varied activities were induced, where possible to accept foster homes in the country. Applications for children poured into Brace's headquarters in response to circu-

lars printed in newspapers in the hinterland. In its first twenty years of operation the Children's Aid Society transported an average of almost one thousand children a year to rural communities in New York, adjacent states, and the West. The emigrants moved in companies of from twenty to forty; when they arrived at a designated town they were welcomed by a committee of local citizens who supervised their placement in farmers' homes. As Brace acknowledged, the success of the emigration feature of 'moral disinfection' was in part the result of the demand for cheap agricultural labor. The children receive board and room, and the farmers obtained new hands to help with the planting, hoeing, and housework (1956:39-40).

Of all of his writings only The Dangerous Classes of New York is remembered (most often in cursory reference, if at all);⁴ yet, Brace was one of the most influential reformers of late 19th century America who largely articulated the concept of self-help and opposed all charitable efforts which (in his view) tended toward pauperization. The Dangerous Classes is a comprehensive source book for the study of 19th century urban poverty: it is both a composite portraiture of urban poverty, and a blueprint (on Brace's terms of religion and regeneration) for its reform. Brace presents a sombre picture of urban pathology (e.g., crime; family disintegration; alcoholism, vagrancy; prostitution; street gangs; child labor abuse; illegitimacy and foundlings; and juvenile crime) and interpolates, among these grim pictures of social pathology, the remedies and constructs of reform.

It is these constructs of reform which intrude into contemporary contexts. One could hardly argue that Brace understood the dynamics of class struggle, or that in advocating that the poor become "useful producers," he sought the transformation of a lumpenproletariat into working-class coalitions of the poor who would aim their energies at economic issues--jobs, schools, housing. Yet, it is in this direction that Brace's efforts tend. He states it quite clearly in language which is a blend of moral exhortation and hardnosed economic reality:

To attempt to prevent or cure the fearful moral diseases of our lowest classes without Christianity, is like trying to carry through a sanitary reform in a city without sunlight.

But the mistake we refer to, is a too great use of, or confidence in, the old technical methods--such as distributing tracts, and holding prayer-meetings, and scattering Bibles. The neglected and ruffian class which we are considering are in no way affected directly by such influences as these. New methods must be invented for them.

Another obstacle, in American cities, to any comprehensive results of reform or prevention among these classes has been the too blind following of European precedents. In Europe, the labor-market is fully supplied. There is a steady pressure of population on subsistence. No general method of prevention or charity can be attempted which interferes with the rights of honest and self-supporting labor. The victims of society, the unfortunate, the enfants perdus, must be retained, when aided at all, in public institutions. They cannot be allowed to compete with outside industry. They are not wanted in the general market of labor. They must be kept in Asylums.

Now, Asylums are a bequest of monastic days. They breed a species of character which is monastic-indolent, unused to struggle; subordinate indeed, but with little independence and manly vigor. If the subjects of

the modern monastery be unfortunates--especially if they be already somewhat tainted with vice and crime--the effect is a weakening of true masculine vigor, an increase of the apparent virtues, and a hidden growth of secret and contagious vices. Moreover, the life under the machinery of an 'Institution' does not prepare for the thousand petty handlabors of a poor man's cottage. But, greatest of all objections, the asylum system is, of necessity, immensely expensive, and can reach but a comparatively small number of subjects.

The various obstacles and difficulties, which impede through work for the elevation of our worst classes, can, however, be overcome (76-69).

However one chooses to react to The Dangerous Classes of New York, the book is an important chronicle in the history of poverty in America. It can be read as a chronicle, and nothing else; and it can be stripped of any ideological scaffolding (even its religious base), and its contemporary relevance may be denied. Its prose, however, may be no more awkward than ours to readers a century away. What remains indisputable is that it is a major corpus in the canon of 19th century reform literature, and that, if nothing else, justifies its study.

Footnotes

¹Moynihan, 1970:30. See, also, Moynihan, 1969; and the new emphasis and perspectives in the revised Glazer and Moynihan, 1970. The ethnics in Brace's The Dangerous Classes (Cf., the description of Italians in Chapter XVII) bear little resemblance to the ethnics of Glazer and Moynihan, yet it is interesting to contrast the early notices of the Italians and the Irish ("Ignorant Roman Catholics," as Brace observes) in The Dangerous Classes with those of the Glazer-Moynihan subcommunities of a century later.

²Bayard Rustin's analysis (1965) of the plight of the American black poor is particularly instructive, e.g., his emphasis on the need for the Civil Rights struggle of the 1950s and 1960s to evolve into a full-fledged social movement. On the diversion of the goals of the American Black revolution see Feldman, 1967, and Milstein, 1970. Milstein puts the thesis in these terms:

The affinities between business conservatism and black nationalism are both programmatic and organizational. They reveal themselves most blatantly in the 'black capitalism' boondoggle currently being perpetrated by CORE and the Nixon administration; but the thrust of the alliance--for such it became--was plain even before it 'went public,' specifically in the general indifference of black nationalists to the economic plight of the Negro masses--or rather, in their redefinition of the problem as 'white racism' rather than poverty (which after all affects many more whites than blacks) and economic exploitation (which affects a majority of Americans and degrades them all). 'Going it alone' became the proud watchword of the nationalists; slogans like 'black power,' 'black is beautiful,' and 'burn baby burn' were meant to dissolve Negro self-hate and instill the self-confidence which was necessary for blacks to pull themselves up by their 'bootstraps.' This of course was but a black version of what the economic elite has always preached to the poor. Once one accepts the logic of this approach, social programs aimed at collective upward mobility through full employment, quality public education, better housing, and so on, take on the appearance of bureaucratic doles, patronizing handouts, and insidious efforts to undermine individual moral character" (37-38).

³The best biographical source is that assembled by his daughter, Emma Brace, 1894. See also, The Children's Aid Society of New York: Its History, Plans and Results, 1893, and some notices of Brace in Bremner, 1956. See also, Children's Aid Society, the Crusade for Children: A Review of Child Life in New York During 75 Years, 1853-1928; Rowell, 1888; and Riis, 1892:187-210 and 248-256. For a retrospective review of Brace's work in The Children's Aid Society, see Folks, 1902.

⁴The Dangerous Classes of New York and Twenty Years' Work Among Them, 1872; a third edition, with some excisions and addenda, appeared in 1880 (the original 1872 edition is more complete than the 3rd edition; there was no 2nd edition). Brace's most successful book was Gesta Christi: Or A History of Humane Progress Under Christianity, 1882, which went through four editions. Brace's other books included The Races of the Old World: A Manual of Ethnology, 1863; popular travel books, e.g., Home Life in Germany, 1853; a multitude of tracts, e.g., The Best Method of Disposing of Our Pauper and Vagrant Children, 1859, which sketched the basic philosophy of placing "the outcast child" in the homes of farmers (see The Dangerous Classes, pp. 223-225); and a mystical treatise, The Unknown God: Or, Inspiration Among Pre-Christian Races, 1890.

References

Brace, Charles Loring

1853 Home Life in Germany. New York: Scribner's.

1859 The Best Method of Disposing of Our Pauper and Vagrant Children. New York: Wynkoop, Hallenbeck and Thomas.

1863 The Races of the Old World: A Manual of Ethnology. New York: Scribner's.

1872 The Dangerous Classes of New York and Twenty Years' Work Among Them. New York: Wynkoop and Hallenbeck.

1882 Gesta Christi: Or A History of Humane Progress Under Christianity. New York: Scribner's.

1890 The Unknown God: Or Inspiration Among Pre-Christian Races. New York: A.C. Armstrong.

Brace, Emma

1894 The Life of Charles Loring Brace, Chiefly Told in His Own Letters. New York: Scribner's.

Bremner, Robert H.

1956 From the Depths: The Discovery of Poverty in the United States. New York: New York University Press.

The Children's Aid Society of New York

1893 The Children's Aid Society of New York: Its History, Plans and Results. New York: The Society.

1928 The Children's Aid Society, the Crusade for Children: A Review of Child Life in New York During 75 Years, 1853-1928. New York: The Society.

Feldman, Paul

1967 "The pathos of black power." Dissent (January-February).

Folks, Homer

1902 The Care of Destitute, Neglected, and Delinquent Children. New York: Macmillan.

Glazer, Nathan and Daniel P. Moynihan

1970 Beyond the Melting Pot: The Negroes, Puerto Rican, Jews, Italians and Irish of New York City. Cambridge: Massachusetts Institute of Technology Press.

Milstein, Tom

1970 "Perspective on the Panthers." Commentary (September).

Moynihan, Daniel P.

1969 Maximum Feasible Misunderstanding: Community Action in the War on Poverty. New York: Free Press.

1970 "Text of pre-inauguration to President-elect Richard M. Nixon memo." New York Times (March 11): 30.

Riis, Jacaob

1892 The Children of the Poor. New York: Scribner's.

Rowell, George P., ed.

1888 New York Charities Directory. New York: Charity Organization Society of the City of New York.

Rustin, Bayard

1965 "From protest to politics." Commentary (February).